DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 373 349 CS 214 477

AUTHOR Wilner, Arlene
TITLE Role-Playing as Critical Thinking in the Technical Writing Classroom.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Awareness; *Case Studies; Class Activities; Critical Thinking; Higher Education; *Role Playing; Teacher Attitudes; *Technical Writing; Writing Assignments; *Writing Improvement
IDENTIFIERS Faculty Attitudes; Rider College NJ

ABSTRACT

Given the affective dimension of writing in the workplace, assignments based on casebook scenarios have definite advantages in a technical or professional writing course. An English professor surveyed faculty in the Schools of Business and Education at Rider College prior to revising a course in technical writing. A majority of faculty, when asked to identify weaknesses in their students' writing, mentioned problems with coherence, logical progression, understanding the question, and ability to isolate essential points in the assignment. The faculty also often asked students to assume roles in their written work, but generally did not provide instruction in how to do so or in how to define an audience. Recent explorations of the meaning of "technical" writing lend credibility to the idea that inquiry based on procedural knowledge for the purpose of transforming a set of data into a "useful" document is much more the essence of technical writing than lists of forms and formats in technical writing textbooks. An example of a casebook scenario involved students writing a letter to a professor concerning an unenthusiastic letter of recommendation. Women in the class placed more importance on maintaining a cordial relationship, while men were willing to sacrifice a conciliatory tone to set the record straight. The process of revision required that the students envision themselves in a relationship with the reader that was somewhat different from the one they had initially imagined. (Contains 35 references and a sample letter to the professor.) (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
A. Wilner
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Arlene Wilner
Department of English
Rider College
March 1994

CCCC Convention--Nashville

ED 373 349

Role-Playing as Critical Thinking in the Technical Writing Classroom

When I was asked several years ago to revise our course in Technical Writing, my first job was to decide just what technical writing is-- and what form the course should take at Rider College. Since we don't have an engineering school, our course could not be "technical" in the most commonly used sense of that word. In what sense, then, would the course be "technical"? I knew that, like Freshman Composition, Technical Writing was viewed as a "service" course and was, unlike the comp. and lit. courses I was used to teaching, tied concretely to vocational success. I knew that Technical Writing might be more aptly called Professional Writing or Working in the Workplace. I therefore decided to survey the Rider Faculty in the Schools of Business and Education (Schools in which many of my Tech. Writing students would be enrolled) to see how those professors perceived the needs of their students.

What I found was that although grammar review was the item cited most frequently among suggested topics for a professional writing course, **a majority of professors, when asked to identify weaknesses in their students' writing, mentioned problems with coherence, logical progression, understanding the question, and ability to isolate essential points in the assignment that would lead to an appropriate response.** Moreover, professors said they

CS214477

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

often asked students to assume roles (i.e., personae other than "student") in their written work, but generally did not provide instruction in how to do so or in how to define an audience or tailor a document to a particular audience;

We all know that it is far easier to teach a set of grammatical rules than it is to teach the more complex skills cited by the professors who responded to my survey. How many of us can remember, let only articulate or define, how we acquired complex cognitive skills? And if we don't know how we learned these skills, can we figure out how to teach them to our students? What many of us would agree on, I think, is that traditional methods such as grammar skills and a heavy reliance on rhetorical forms as models to be imitated are not likely to have much effect on student writing. Common sense, in fact, would suggest that there is an inverse relationship between skill levels and ability to benefit from mechanical approaches: that is, the students who most need to improve are least likely to do so with these traditional methods, because they do not have what has been called the "procedural knowledge" necessary to apply principle to practice. Conversely, those who possess the necessary procedual knowledge gnerally also have the knowledge (at least at an intuitive level) that formal "skills" lessons are designed to teach.

Research conducted over the last two decades has confirmed these intuitions. George Hillocks, Jr., Professor in the Departments of English and Education at the University of

Chicago, who some years ago synthesized the results of twenty years of research in writing, has offered the following conclusions:

1. Studying models can teach students to identify and perhaps evaluate the features of such models (i.e., "declarative knowledge"), but it does not give them the skills necessary to imitate them (i.e., "procedural knowledge"): "It is one thing to identify a good piece of writing and quite another to produce it, just as it is one thing to identify a virtuoso trumpet performance and impossible for most of us to replicate it."

2. The approach that seems to have the greatest effect on student writing is of the type that Hillocks calls "inquiry." In this approach students are asked **to use sets of data in performing specified tasks,** such as describing, presenting evidence, applying criteria for evaluation, developing hypotheses, etc. (The idea of <u>using sets of data in perfoming specified tasks</u> suggests how I began to define technical writing for our students at Rider.) The data may simply be something to be observed--a familiar object or a drawing--or it may be a scenario, or a problematic case. Studies indicate that inquiry procedures are far more effective in improving student writing than the presentation of models to be imitated. The inquiry focus appears to "help writers

> learn strategies for transforming data for use in writing."

A freshman English course based on Hillocks' approach would share important features with what I think of as an effective technical writing class. Indeed, recent explorations of the meaning of "technical" writing lend credibility to the idea that Hillock's technique--inquiry based on procedural knowledge for the purpose of transforming a set of data into a "useful" document--is much more the essence of technical writing than the list of forms and formats comprising, until very recently, the table of contents of almost every technical or professional writing textbook.

A similar approach to writing pedagogy is offered by David Dobrin, a former Professor at MIT and now president of a consulting firm that specializes in technical communication. In his brilliant book Writing and Technique (published by NCTE), Dobrin defines technical writing in terms not of what it looks like, how it sounds, who writes it, or whom it addresses, but rather in terms of what it accomplishes: "Technical writing is writing that accommodates technology to the user" (54): Dobrin's elaboration of this definition is worth quoting at length:

> [Technical writing] takes something initially strange, invasive, and expensive, and accommodates people to it--turns it into something familiar and useful. Much more,

> however, is involved in making technology useful than simple factual statements about the technological idea. The technology must be accommodated to the way people really are. . . . [e.g.] the way the company is organized, the way people work with related products, the way the idea is being produced, the goals of the people involved. . . .The word 'accommodate' reminds us that integrating a technology is setting up a human relationship, with all the attendant feints. (57)

The idea that technical writing, by definition, involves "setting up a human relationship" seems to contradict the traditional wisdom that technical writing is, above all, impersonal, i.e., that individual persona should disappear completely within the "objectivity" of the text. Dobrin's approach has received increasing emphasis in recent thought and research on the subject, and it is an approach that I believe is essentially correct. David Lauerman, who has helped to develop a highly successful technical writing course at Canisius College under the guidance of Lee Odell and Dixie Goswami, has persuasively argued for the importance to the professional writer of "building and projecting an ethos appropriate to the situation" (211). It has even been suggested that students of technical writing study classical rhetoric to learn how "the subtle emotional effects of style" can move people to think or do as the writer hopes they

will(Corbett 67-68). Linda Flower, who has researched the congnitive processes that underlie successful writing has shown how "reader-based" prose requires writers not only to imagine their readers' needs, but also to expand their options in addressing those needs by developing an awareness of what they themselves know and of how they are using what they know, i.e, a meta-critique of their own practices ("Cognition" 14, 29). In this view the writer's self-awareness is critical to whether the text "works" for the reader. These researchers represent a growing number who not only agree that effective professional writing involves what Dobrin calls "setting up a human relationship," but who believe that teaching the necessary skills is best done through practice in the complex tasks required by rhetorical problem-solving, an adaptation of the "case" approach familiar to law and business students.

The connection between rhetorical problem-solving and critical thinking is easy to see. What is especially interesting, however, is that critical thinking itself has been defined as a special kind of problem-solving requiring "reasoning about 'ill-structured problems' [e.g., messy and complex real-life situations] that have no single solution" (Kurfiss 28). What I am arguing here is that such problem-solving requires, above all, the ability to determine and to successfully play the role or roles demanded by a particular rhetorical situation, and that such role-playing naturally has a dimension that is affective and imaginative.

Although the document one strives to produce in a technical writing situation may look and feel "objective," such a document, if it is to be successful, will not be the product of mechanical practices that promise "just the facts, ma'am," but will rather result from the exercise of a sympathetic imagination. That is, the capacity to imagine which facts to include, in what order, at what level of detail, with what sort of introduction and in what context, to name but a few of the necessary considerations. Although all textbooks enjoin students to "know" these things, the process by which one comes to know them is a subtle and elusive as the terms "tone" and "style." In a classroom exercise based on a complex situation (i.e., a "case"), such knowledge depends on the ability to imagine oneself simultaneously in at least three different roles: 1)in the role of the writer in the case, 2)in the role of the audience for whom the document is intended, and 3)in the role of the writer as he or she is likely to be perceived by the intended audience as a result of the document.

A major variable in the last is the degree to which and the way in which writer and reader already know each other. For example: Is the document the only instance of communication between the writer and reader, as a letter to an insurance company appealing denial of a claim might be? Will the information in the document be presented personally by the writer in what he or she hopes will be the beginning of a professional relationhip, as a customized business proposal might be? Is the written document an extension of an already established

relationship, as a letter to a superior might be? If so, does the writer want to reinforce the terms of the relationship or subtly shift them in another direction? The ability to connect with the reader depends on one's ability to "read" the reader, and more than this, in a sense to be the reader in the context of the writing moment and also to be the writer as viewed by the reader. Doug Brent's fine study of the relationship between reading and writing illuminates the importance of anticipating the intended reader's "repertoire"--his or her "set of interpretive conventions, linguistic and world knowledge, and personal associations organized as schemata" (31) as well as "emotional associations and values" (106).

Given the affective dimension of writing in the workplace, assignments based on casebook scenarios have definite advantages in a technical or professional writing course: They show inexperienced writers the importance of role-playing in effective communication and, if peer review and revision are required, give them practice in finding the right voice for a particular document. Thus, students are given the opportunity to role-play within the kinds of constraints they are likely to encounter on the job. Moreover, as John L. DiGaetani of Hofstra has observed, rhetorical problem-solving based on the case method simulates the complexity of real-life situations in allowing for different kinds of solutions for the same problems--or possibly no clear solution at all (189). C.H. Knoblauch, an expert on rhetoric and pedagogy who believes the only really good "case" is an authentic one (i.e, one based on a real-life campus issue affecting the

lives of students) ultimately acknowledges the value of even "artificial" case studies: such scenarios, he suggests, make students conscious of the subtle and complex contexts of professional discourse--"a texture of competing values, intentions, and rhetorical possibilities"--and helps them learn to respond to these effectively (262).

What follows is an illustration of how some students in my spring 1993 technical writing class dealt with an assignment that required them to consider--to use Prof. Knoblauch's phrase-- "a texture of competing values, intentions, and rhetorical possibilities." The case itself, called "The Lukewarm Recommendation," is from a text called *Casebook Rhetoric: A Problem Solving Approach to Composition* by David Tedlock of Iowa State University and Paul Jarvie of Forum Corporation. In brief, the situation students are asked to imagine is this:

> You are applying for a summer internship and your marketing professor has filed a letter of recommendation with the college's placement office. You discover that the letter is not as enthusiastic as you assumed it would be; in fact, it seems to imply that you are mediocre and, in your mind, damns you with faint praise. You are especially surprised because you've received two A's from Professor Sterling in previous courses, and you are currently running a B in his advanced seminar. The letter has already been sent to your potential employer, but you feel that you should at least talk to your professor about the misunderstanding and, if necessary, ask to have the potentially harmful letter

withdrawn from your file. If you do decide to have the letter withdrawn, college regulations require that you notify the professor in writing.

Students were given a choice of assignments: They could write to Professor Sterling asking him to reconsider the tone of the letter so that it might be used in the future, or they could inform him in writing that they felt obliged to remove the letter from their file.

Not surprisingly, the responses exhibited a wide range of attitudes, from quite aggressive--and even a little hostile--to polite, formal, and detached, to tentative, self-conscious, and self-qualifying. Clearly, there was no handbook or rule book that could tell students how to write this letter to achieve the desired effect. Inevitably, each approach reflected the student's personality, academic training, and even "family values." Gender appeared to be a significant factor as well. Generally women in the class seemed to place more importance on maintaining a cordial relationship with the professor, even if that meant swallowing a little pride; men were more willing to sacrifice a conciliatory tone if, in doing so, they felt they could set the record straight. Here, for example, is first draft of a paper written by a young man about to graduate with a major in marketing: [see sample #1, attached]. In striking contrast with the tone of this document was the letter written by a young woman about to graduate with the intention of purusing a career in early childhood education. She opened by assuring Dr. Sterling that she did not intend to offend him by withdrawing his letter

from her file and noted that she felt "a little uncertain about the effects of your comments on Delta's final decision to either hire me not hire me," adding, "Your efforts are appreciated nonetheless." Her last paragraph reflected her discomfort in having to write the letter at all:

> Thank you for putting forth the effort to enhance my chances in this case. Perhaps I will seek another person to write a letter in my favor, although you were my first choice to do so. I feel a little let down by the nature of your meaning. Your tone was less than enthusiastic, which was not the tone that I expected for the letter. Thank you for your time. Perhaps you can recommend me for another position at another time, if that is all right with you.

Other drafts reflected what I believed to be a misplaced emphasis on secondary details. One very bright accounting major, for example, devoted a long paragraph to explaining why his first paper in the Advanced Seminar was not quite up to his usual standards. Another suggested that Professor Sterling had mistaken her for another student, even though she was currently taking a third class with him: "I assumed you knew who I was because we would speak to one another in the halls."

Drafts were read aloud to the class in a workshop setting, and each writer was given immediate peer feedback as to the effectiveness of his or her letter. Usually students expressed definite feelings about what worked and what didn't, although they often looked to me to articulate strategies for making

appropriate changes. My job was to make them conscious of how their documents communicated a unique tone and therefore a unique message even though they were all working from the same "facts," to show how this tone might define the purpose of the document for the reader in a way the writer had not intended, and to help them increase their repertoire of strategies and approaches so that they could make better choices in composing. All of these activities naturally involved playing the three roles mentioned above. The process of revision, therefore, required that they envision themselves in a relationship with the reader that was somewhat different from the one they had initially imagined.
In my view, such role-playing is essential to the success of what is commonly called "technical" writing. Moreover, it is, as my colleagues on this panel have suggested, crucial to effective student performance in writing classes of very different kinds.

Selected Bibliography--Technical/Professional Writing

[Note: Items marked with asterisk(*)are cited in previous essay.]

Bazerman, Charles. "A Relationship Between Reading and Writing: The Conversational Model." *College English* vol. 41, no. 6 (Feb. 1980), 656-61.

Berthoff, Ann E. *The Making of Meaning*. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 1981.

*Brent, Doug. *Reading as Rhetorical Invention: Knowledge, Persuasion, and the Teaching of Research-Based Writing*, Urbana: NCTE, 1992.

Bruffee, Kenneth A. "Collaborative Learning and the "'Conversation of Mankind'" *College English* vol. 46, no. 7 (Nov. 1984), 635-52.

Coney, Mary B. "The Use of the Reader in Technical Writing." *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* vol. 8 no. 2 (1978), 97-106.

*Corbett, Edward P. J. "What Classical Rhetoric Has to Offer the Teacher and the Student of Business and Professional Writing," in *Writing in the Business Professions*, ed. Myra Kogen (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1989), 65-72.

*DiGaetani, John L. "Use of the Case Method in Teaching Business Communication," in Kogen, op. cit., 187-201.

*Dobrin, David. *Writing and Technique*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1989.

Elbow, Peter. "Closing My Eyes As I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience." *College English* vol. 49, no.1 (Jan. 1987), 50-69.

Emig, Janet. "Writing as a Mode of Learning." *College Composition and Communication* vol. 28 (May 1977), 122-128.

Falk, Julia S. "Language Acquisition and the Teaching and Learning of Writing." College English vol. 41, no. 4 (Dec. 1979), 436-47.

*Flower, Linda S. "Rhetorical Problem-Solving: Cognition and Professional Writing," in Kogen, op. cit., 3-36.

Flower, Linda S. and John R. Hayes. "Problem-Solving Strategies and the Writing Process." *College English*, Vol. 39, No.4, Dec. 1977, 449-61.

Harty, Kevin J. *Strategies for Business and Technical Writing*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989.

*Hillocks, George, Jr. "Inquiry and the Composing Process: Theory and Research." *College English*, Nov. 1982.

*----------. "Synthesis of Research on Teaching Writing." *Educational Leadership*, May 1987.

Hirsch, E.D. *The Philosophy of Composition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.

Knoblauch, C.H. "Rhetorical Constructions: Dialogue and Commitment." *College English* vol. 50, no. 2 (Feb. 1988), 125-40.

*Knoblauch, C. H. and Lil Brannon. *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*. (Upper Montclair: Boynton/Cook, 1984.)

*Kurfiss, Joanne C. *Critical Thinking: Theory, Research, Practice, and Possibilities*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 2, 1988.

*Lauerman, David. "Building Ethos: Field Research in a Business Communication Course," in Kogen, op. cit. , 202-21.

McKée, "Do Writers Use an Outline When They Write?' *Technical Communication*, First Quarter 1972, 10-13.

Miller, Walter James, "What Can the Technical Writer of the Past Teach the Technical Writer of Today?" *IRE Transactions on Engineering Writing and Speech*, vol. EWS 4, no. 3 (Dec. 1961), 69-76.

Moffatt, James. *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1968.

Ryan, Michael and James W. Tankard, Jr., "Problem Areas in Science News Writing." *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* vol. 4, no. 3 (Summer 1974), 225-35.

Sides, Charles H., ed. *Technical and Business Communication: Bibliographic Essays for Teachers and Corporate Trainers*. Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1989.

Stratton, Charles R. "Technical Writing: What It Is and What It Isn't." *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, Vol. 9, no. 1, 1979, 9-15.

SAMPLE #1

Dear Dr. Sterl'ng;

I have decided to withdraw your letter of recommendation from my file at the Office of Career Placement. You have left me with no other alternative. Please allow me to explain my reasons.

When a company develops a product, it is up to the marketing department to promote it. The company is proud of its product and wants to show it off to consumers, so they advertise it using words like best, better, high performance, and smart buy. What a company does not do is claim that their product is not the greatest but also not the worst. Nor do they advertise that it will do the job adequately.

I, like a company, am advertising a product, myself. This product is very important to me. I have to look after its image and make certain that it receives the right kind of publicity. The image that I have created for myself consists of words like hard working, good under pressure, analytical and a cut above the rest. When I read your letter of recommendation I was shocked by it. Your letter was to be an endorsement for me.

When you agreed to write the letter, I was excited and felt that your recommendation would be good for my image. It would help me get the job at Delta Electronics which would act as a stepping stone to a top ranked business school. This is what I believed, until I had read the letter. I value your opinion and think that you are one of the better teachers on campus, keeping this letter in my file is not in my best interest. You may have felt that the letter does me credit; I fail to see it that way. I am a product of all that I have learned and experienced in life. It is my duty to present myself in a

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

positive way to those who are looking to hire me. I hope that this letter expresses that belief and that you understand my side of the situation. You have already established yourself as a respected professor; please give me the chance to establish who I am.

Thank You

John J. Smith